

Carter/Ward Cottage History in South Beach, Gimli

Written by Evelyn Ward, 2013

Why Gimli?

The reason my maternal grandparents built their cottage in 1938 in South Beach, Gimli, Manitoba was because my grandmother Winifred's older brother Percy Harris built there first.

So why did her older brother build a cottage in Gimli sometime around 1912?

Lake Winnipeg, the eleventh largest freshwater lake in the world, was a short trip away from the stifling Winnipeg heat. The small Icelandic settlement of Gimli offered beautiful beaches. The railway had given quick access to the lake since 1906 and many churches had already established Fresh Air Camps for city children along its shores. Instead of just day-tripping many took the opportunity to purchase land and build their summer getaways. The May 25, 1912 edition of the *Manitoba Free Press* listed a number of prominent Winnipeggers as summer residents of Gimli.

*"The most beautiful cottage of the number is owned by E.W. Derby, of Winnipeg, who opened it for the season last week. His summer residence is situated close to the town park. This park is a beautifully wooded area of closely growing spruce trees.....Building operations have commenced on a cottage for W.J. Osborne of the Winnipeg Electric Street Railway Company. A number of cottages, the lumber for which is on the ground, will be built shortly. Among those who have already located their summer homes in Gimli, on Loni Beach, are A.F. Andrews of the Ogilvie Flour Mills company, D. Ernest of the R.J. Whittla Company Staff, Henry Downing the well-known real estate dealer, Albert Johnson, A.S. Bardal, undertaker, J. Vopni real estate dealer and building contractor, **P.D. Harris** of the teaching staff of*

Central Collegiate, Dr. Stephanson M.D, J. Hiebert of Altona and others."

This included my great uncle Percy D. Harris (b 1880). He built Whippoorwill Cottage at what is now 34 South Beach Road (formerly South Colonization Road and before that, Gimli Road).

Percy came west to Manitoba in 1891, only a year after my grandmother was born in Forest Ontario. He was her older brother whom she barely knew and the reason she 'immigrated' to Winnipeg from Toronto sometime in the late 1920's. Older by nearly 20 years! With that vast age difference Percy and May's kids felt more like an uncle and aunts to Winifred than cousins.

As well as various teaching positions, Percy Harris was principal of numerous schools in Winnipeg (ref, Gimli Saga, p. 118). He is listed as a Memorable Manitoban.

Percy and Nina May Harris had a son George Harding (1900-1976), and two daughters, Florence Ada (1903-1983) and Mary Elizabeth, nicknamed 'Bessie' (1905-1974). Both girls followed their father into the teaching profession.

Florence taught at Lord Selkirk School (1929-41) and Daniel McIntyre Collegiate Institute (1946-62). After that she authored numerous school textbooks including *The Art of Poetry* and *A Packet of Prose*, published by McClelland and Stewart Ltd. In 1967, in commemoration of Canada's 100th anniversary, she was one of the recipients awarded a medal presented by the federal government to Manitobans for their meritorious community service.

Sister Bessie married another teacher, D. Harold Turner. As well as teaching, they offered drama to inmates at Stoney Mountain Penitentiary.

Neither Bessie nor Florence had children. Florence inherited *Whippoorwill Cottage*. Along with her wonderful teaching and writing skills she had a generous heart. Regularly she would invite all the children in South Beach to Whippoorwill cottage to play.

From her wee kitchen she would emerge with KoolAid made with water hauled by hand from the artesian well down the road served in colourful plastic glasses carried in a wire rack. She sent us out on scavenger hunts and led us in crafts and games. She had the most interesting and unique toys; a huge farm set on the grass, Betsy McCall doll and clothes, and paper dolls. And best of all, 'Aunt Florence' taught me how to knit.

Suffering from a chronic malady, some summer days Florence just wasn't up to having kids around. The days that it was okay to go to *Whippoorwill* to play were the days when she would fly a Union Jack flag out the front. This was her sign. I would run to the end of Hansson Ave to look down the road to see if I could see the flag flying. Even into the 1960s the Union Jack would fly on the odd day.

Long vacations for school teachers made having a cottage the perfect escape from the hot, noisy, and fumey city. Uncle Percy tutored my mother in many subjects to help her gain confidence in her schoolwork.

In the opening pages of the chapter on "Norse Myths" in her textbook *A Packet of Prose* (1967) Florence writes,

"One chilly September evening on the shore of Lake Winnipeg, my father and I watched a brilliant show of Northern Lights. They were yellow and green that night, with a dash of mauve here and there. Every few minutes they would arrange themselves into a rainbow-shaped bridge, quivering with movement, across the whole northern sky. I was surprised to hear my old father say lightly, "There must have been a big battle somewhere today. See the Valkyries are carrying the souls of the dead warriors across the bridge to Valhalla. Only the bravest are chosen to go."

With ease I imagine the spot on the beach where they sat at the end of Hansson Ave, old Percy and his daughter. Perhaps he himself knew he too would soon cross the bridge to Valhalla, though being a Christian would have been more likely to call it Heaven. I have sat in perhaps that exact place myself admiring the aurora but most nights only wishing they would appear. Percy died in 1953 when Florence was 50.

Whippoorwill Cottage was sold upon her death yet still stands today behind a big white fence. No Union Jack flies there anymore.





*Whippoorwill
Cottage,
South Beach
kids doing
crafts, ca.
1937*



*Whippoorwill
Cottage
2013*



Percy Harris in Gimli
Percy Carter



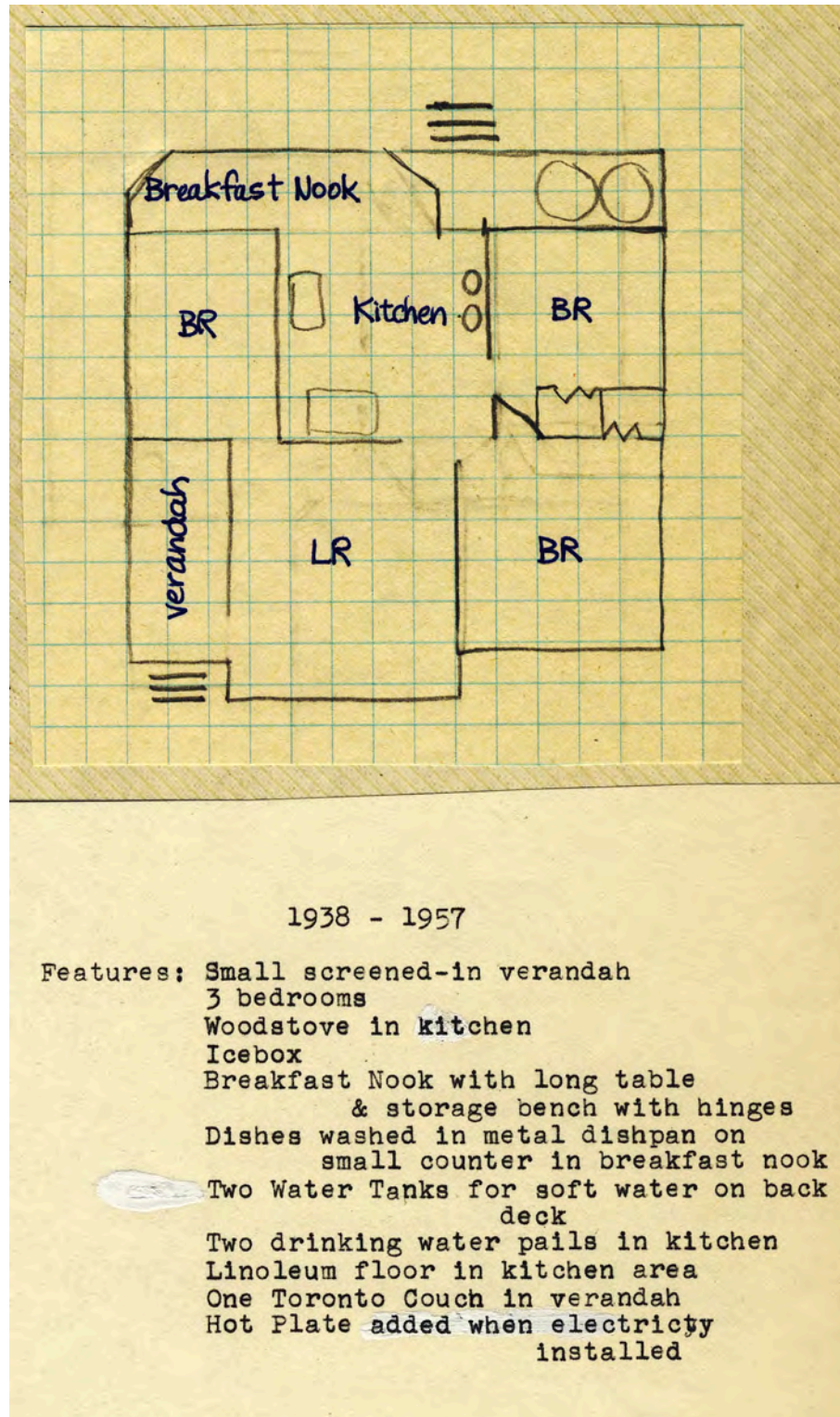


As well as having an older brother named Percy, my grandmother Winifred married a Percy as well, Percy Wallace Carter. He had a good position at T. Eaton Co. as a shoe buyer so they didn't really feel the effects of the depression. For two years they rented a cottage in South Beach to be near her brother. My mother remembered building a tree fort there.

Grampa was prosperous enough to own a car and obviously, to build a summer home which they erected at the end of Benedict Street, right on the lake. It was just around the corner from brother Percy's,

Whippoorwill Cottage. The families spent many a day together swimming, boating and picnicking at Willow Island.

They built a basic frame three-bedroom cottage with a tiny screened in verandah.



When the school bell rang at the end of June they would bundle up and Grampa would deliver them to Gimli for the summer. He would come on weekends.

In the early 1940s British air men were training at the RCAF base in Gimli. They would walk around town on their days off so it wasn't hard to meet them. My mom and her sister were at the perfect age to hang around, go boating and do campfires with them.

My mother said "before we had electricity in our cottage my Mother had to cook and bake on a wood stove. Every Saturday she would bake pies and a roast of beef for my Dad who would drive up in the afternoon for the weekend. I have very vivid memories of my mother baking those pies on a hot day for all of us to enjoy. As I think about it now I realize it was a lot of work for her and we seem to have taken it all for granted."

In the summer of 1946 my Dad proposed to my mother on the beach we still swim at today. Bill Ward and Maxine Carter were married in 1949.

Because of rising lake levels in the 1940-50s, in 1954 my Grandparents had the foresight to move the cottage to a one acre lot on the SE corner of South Beach Road and Hannson Avenue just a stone's throw from *Whippoorwill Cottage*. This larger piece of property allowed my grandfather to have the gardens and raspberry patch he so gently cared for.

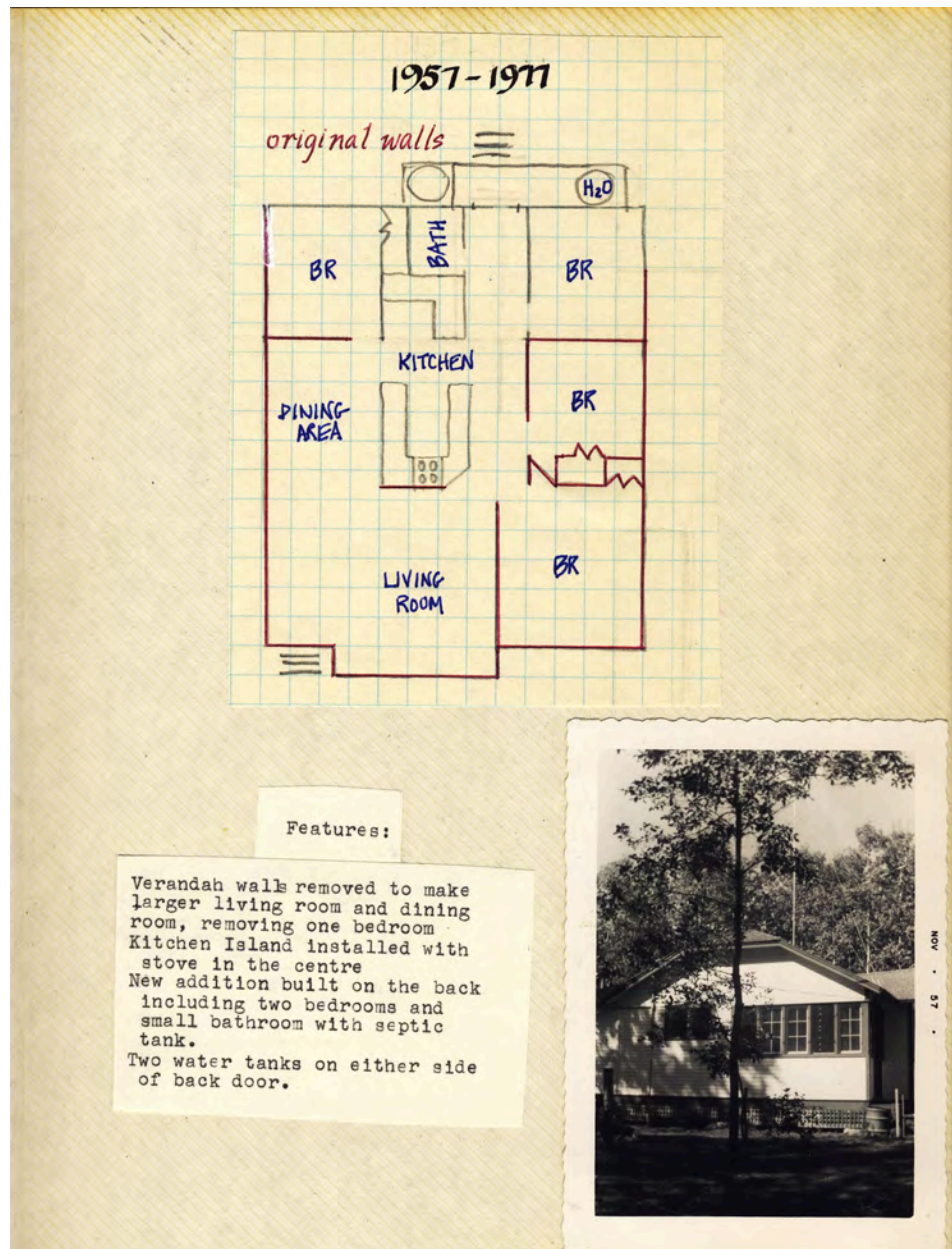
The large parcel of land which Grandpa and Grandma bought in 1954 originally stretched all the way from Hansson right to Benedict. Back then you could subdivide land as you wished. He sectioned off three tiny lots facing Benedict Ave and sold them to the Larsen family. When the town sought to make South Beach more of a subdivision, creating back lanes, he refused to sell the land to the town in order to extend the back lane as he said there was no need for the lane to run through his property and that was that. The town felt there was no need to pursue it and did not.

I always wondered why the laneway stopped at our lot and didn't go right through to South Colonization Road. The laneway ends at our fence. There is a turn-around so a garbage truck or snow plough can maneuver if need be.



We would stay at the cottage from end of school until Labour Day most summers. We always had visitors; Great Gramma Carter, Aunt Jean, Aunt Helen and her girlfriend Maryann. They would play

canasta in the evenings. We played croquet, badminton, Sorry, Pick-Up Sticks, and Chinese Checkers. Hide and Seek, walks, picnics, playing on the beach, swimming, making countless sand castles and nightly campfires.



Percy built a bunkhouse to accommodate my two brothers for sleeping. And a two seater privy (in which my Gramma dropped her

flashlight one night.) He built himself a tool shed. Next he built a little playhouse for us in the 1960s with miniature door and a window that opened. He made a wee play stove from plywood and a table and children's sized chairs painted bright orange or cottage green. My brothers would play tricks on me and put a stick in the lock so I would beg to get out.

Eventually came electricity, an oil burning stove for heat, rain water collection tanks hooked up indoors for dishwashing and an indoor chemical toilet for my grandmother who needed a cane by then.

Around Mother's Day 1967 my Grandfather died at the cottage. They had driven up to Gimli to open up for the season. He had a massive heart attack while raking leaves on the front lawn. Gramma was napping inside. Mrs. Anne Evans, the owner of the little camper's store a few doors down saw him laying on the lawn and called the ambulance and my mother in the city. She stayed with Gramma until they arrived.

My mother inherited the cottage. It took on many renovations to accommodate the ever growing addition of grandchildren. My Dad always wanted a wood burning Franklin stove and added it in 1977 in a sunken living room, so it could be seen from every angle.

In the 1970s we would also spend Thanksgiving at the cottage, closing up. Inviting other families up from the city for the day. Cooking a turkey of a fairly unreliable old oven. Raking up piles of leaves and playing hide the football.

A holding tank for sewage added in 1982 meant we could add on a real bathroom with a toilet and shower. In 2012 we were forced to hook up to town sewage and decommission any biffies for the health of the lake.

My husband and I inherited the cottage as a result of my gracious brothers and their wives. In honour of my mother's family I fly a little Union Jack out front. It helps me remember those lazy summer days

of my childhood and the family that brought me to Gimli, Icelandic for 'a heavenly abode.'

Grandpa Percy and Evelyn, ca. 1959



